(Masculine) Images and (Female) Desire: a Short Trawl through Pornography and Popular Culture

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In 1996 the X-rated video Pure was released by the United States pornography production company Wicked. It stars Jenna Jameson, the 1996 Adult Video News ‘Starlet of the Year’ whose importance may be measured by the fact that she is the only female performer under contract at Wicked. Furthermore, Jameson’s power within the pornographic economy is such that she co-wrote the ‘script’. Pure consists of a number of vignettes featuring various performers and sexual configurations.

One of these vignettes is particularly striking. It features Jameson, dressed in a man’s business suit and ostentatiously smoking a cigarette in a holder, circling a (heterosexual) couple in the act of love making. The set is reminiscent of Berlin circa 1920. The expectation is that, true to pornographic convention, Jameson will divest herself of her clothes and the couple will become a threesome. In fact, Jameson’s involvement is limited to a fairly perfunctory squeeze of the performers’ buttocks. Rather, she simply encircles the couple and then pauses in front of them, holding her gaze at the camera for several seconds, before inviting the viewer to ‘enjoy’ and slinking off stage.

What is it that is so remarkable about this video and this vignette in particular? On a superficial level, the first arresting feature is that the segment boasts a rather spectacularly attractive male performer. Since sex moved onto celluloid, pornography has been characterised by male performers who are determinedly physically average, even ugly. The lack of aesthetic virtues among male porn stars is personified by Ron Jeremy, a ubiquitous porn performer of the 1980s whose nickname - The Hedgehog - perfectly encapsulates the degree of voyeuristic pleasure women could garner from his presence. The second notable feature about Pure is its marketing angle. In Australia it was advertised in the ‘couples’ section of pornography catalogues. ‘Couples’ has joined other categories like ‘gay’ (male), ‘European’ and ‘bizarre’ to become a staple of 1990s pornography catalogues. This is an explicit admission that women are pornography
consumers. Admittedly, that consumption is figured in the context of being part of a heterosexual ‘couple’ and there is no space specifically for lesbian women. Nonetheless, female voyeurism has firmly entered the pornographic economy.

This essay attempts to analyse the recent emergence in Australia of sexual images in pornography and popular culture that are explicitly aimed at female ‘subject’ consumers. In other words, images that invite women to enjoy scopophilic pleasure as subjects rather than objects of the desiring gaze. Although I engage with the long-running and bitter feminist debate about whether pornography objectifies women and results in increased sexual violence it is not my dominant concern. Rather, I am more interested in the capacity of pornographic and popular images to offer women pleasure and empowerment through an inversion of traditional subject/object relations.

My free movement along the representational spectrum between hard core pornography and advertising and filmic images is appropriate given that pornography no longer inhabits an underground niche in the market. Where in the 1940s and 1950s sexualised images were located in fairly discrete bodies of representation, by the 1980s pornographic images proliferated in the culture at large. Erotic images now prevail not just in ‘men’s magazines’ but in advertising, mainstream magazines, films and novels. Jocelynne Scutt quoted prominent American feminist Gloria Steinem as saying ‘there is hardly a news stand without women’s bodies in chains and bondage, in full labial display ... the same images are in mainstream movie theatres ... they are brought into our own homes not only in magazines, but in the new form of video cassettes’. Pornographic, advertising, journalistic and cinematic mediums all dip into the cultural melting pot of sexual images. ‘Hard core porn is not separate from the discourse of ordinary life, but merely its more extreme extension.’ The early Women Against Violence and Exploitation (WAVE) slide shows attempted to demonstrate this commonality in portrayals of female sexuality by opening with the distorted images of advertising, moving on to the ‘battered chic’ of the fashion magazines and finally displaying Playboy images.

The mainstreaming of pornographic images is further illustrated by the sheer number of Australians who purchase them. By 1984, the turnover of videos, magazines and other sex aids in Australia was between $40 000 000 and $60 000 000 per annum. In 1990, 10 000 pornographic movies were despatched each week from Canberra to the other states. Mail order pornography ranked as Canberra’s fifth largest industry in 1990. A national survey by the Roy Morgan Research Centre in 1989 found that 53% of Australian adults were in favour of X-rated videos. It is thus difficult to agree with political commentator Neil Thornton that pornography ‘lacks the ubiquity and close integration with the practical world of the commercial culture at large’. Pornography had well and truly entered the Australian
cultural mainstream by the late 1980s. It is thus entirely appropriate to
discuss popular and pornographic images in the same breath.

In the pornographic vignette discussed above Jameson appears to create
a narrative space for female voyeurism. By gazing so unblinkingly at the
camera she establishes a gaze that filmic pornography traditionally
eschewed: the gaze between the performer and the spectator. In *Hard Core*,
Linda Williams argued that the driving force of modern pornography is
the desire to get at the heart of sex, to make it speak.16 Hard core
pornography is expressive of a desire to make sex ‘real’ and authentic, to
convince us as consumers that what we are seeing is ‘the real thing’ and
not ‘fake’. When the ‘looked at’ performer locks gazes with the ‘looking’
spectator, the illusion that we are sneaking up on a private, intimate act is
shattered and the authenticity of the voyeuristic experience diminishes.

For example, a scene in one of the 13 pornography videos produced in
Australia as part of the ‘Down Under’ series features a couple engaging in
sex on a car bonnet.17 At one point, the female performer slips and nearly
falls off. She looks at the camera with an expression of alarm and surprise
and whatever erotic frisson had been generated shrivels. In that moment
the consumer is invited to look beyond the spectacular scenery and the
couple in the camera frame and to see the camera crew, the grip boy and
the person serving tea and coffee on a nearby trestle table. The illusion of
reality disintegrates like gossamer.

Jameson makes no attempt to hide from the viewer that what we are
seeing is filmed and ‘unreal’. By watching the couple herself and then
watching the viewer watching the couple, she explicitly locates herself as a
spectator and signals the viewer’s identity as spectator also. Not only is
the female desiring gaze narratively explicit and encouraged, the object of
that gaze is the male performer as much as it is the female actor. The male
performer’s attractiveness exists for the delectation of the (heterosexual)
female viewer. He is the sexual object of consumption for the female
viewing subject.

I have argued elsewhere that the trend towards pornographic scripts
and motifs which are less ‘real’ and more obviously celluloid fantasy might
be a product of the feminist anti-pornography debate.18 As feminists like
Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon popularised the notion of
pornography having a direct, causal effect on men’s actual, empirical
behaviour, pornographic films became more deliberately structured as
‘fantasy’; plots became more complex, characters more three-dimensional
and sets more creative. Thus viewers were encouraged to perceive the film
as existing in an imaginative realm non-synchronous with the real world,
thereby lessening the possibility of men imposing on the ‘real world’ ideas
suggested by pornography. Jameson’s explicit attempts to locate the sex
scenes in an ‘unreal’ environment might be part of this larger trend within
pornography to impress upon both men and women the escapist and
fantastical nature of viewing pornography. Thus any potentially negative
messages’ from pornography are less likely to be internalised by men in the form of stereotyping women as sexual objects or (at its most extreme) violence against women. The obvious fantasy element might also lessen women’s apprehensions about this possible symbiosis between pornography and men’s actual behaviour thus heightening their enjoyment of the voyeuristic experience. Although the attempt to short circuit any behavioural symbiosis between pornography and real life has massive implications for the anti-pornography feminist position, my prime concern is not with male violence but with the implications of this voyeurism for women.

The female gaze is one of the dominant narrative motifs explored in Pure. It is most explicit in the ‘Berlin circa 1920’ vignette but it exists to some degree or another in all of them. In the first segment Jameson (dressed like a French maid) is caught by her female employer watching a pornographic video on a vastly over-sized television screen. Here the consumer is invited to watch the employer watching Jameson watching a video. Given the location of Pure in the ‘couples’ market, it is reasonable to assume that the progression of the gaze (from the consumer into the narrative) might be entirely female. In a later vignette, Jameson wanders onto the set midway through an all girl scene. The performers remain ‘unaware’ of her presence and Jameson does not join them. Rather she sits at a chair and ‘watches’. Critics might suggest that this scene merely duplicates the traditional male fantasy of lesbian sex. Andrea Dworkin has argued that such scenes bear little resemblance to actual lesbian love-making and exist purely for the male viewer whereby the camera substitutes for the penile presence. In this scene, however, the implication is that the camera is an extension of Jameson’s gaze rather than that of an unseen male consumer. The female desiring gaze of both the performer and the consumer is the recurring theme of the video.

The market and discursive visibility of female voyeurism and the location of men as sexual objects for the delectation of women is a 1990s phenomenon. The pornographic discourse of the 1970s and 1980s tended to be characterised by the non-existence of the female gaze deployed in a quest for pleasure. In fact female sexual pleasure itself, whilst admitted in the debate about pornography, tended to be subsumed under the more urgent task of making women safe from sexual peril. Furthermore, many feminist engagements with pornography and sexuality in the 1980s tended to emphasise the differences between men’s and women’s sexual responses rather than focussing on their points of convergence. The result was a disavowal of female voyeurism and the identification (and condemnation) of the desiring gaze as a peculiarly masculine phenomenon.

There were several publications which did not support this view. The edited collection Caught Looking juxtaposed pro-sex feminist essays with pornographic photos from various eras. Ruby B. Rich, Carole S. Vance and Mariana Valverde were among those feminists who consistently argued
for a space for female sexual experimentation and empowerment. However, the more dominant sexual paradigm within the feminist and mainstream press was that of the anti-pornography feminists. In the English speaking world, this paradigm tended to be characterised by unremitting gloominess about both the depiction of, and the engagement in, heterosexual sex.

For example, the former chair of the Victorian Law Commission and prolific author Dr Jocelynne Scutt, proposed that one of the elements of pornography that made it actionable under her suggested amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act were depictions of women ‘presented in postures of sexual submission or sexual servility, including by inviting penetration’. ‘Inviting’ penetration was, in this scenario, an attitude of abject defeat and slavish vanquishment. The woman who actively enveloped a penis for her own pleasure was entirely absent. Rather, she was ‘penetrated’. This suspicion about heterosexual sex was most explicit in Andrea Dworkin’s Intercourse in which she came perilously close to suggesting that all heterosexual sex is rape.

Not only was heterosexual sex constructed as a questionable political practice in which men were rapacious monsters and women meek objects, but the sexualities of men and women tended to be constructed as oppositional in the 1980s. Australian civil libertarian and columnist Beatrice Faust (although not an anti-pornography feminist) argued that where men were visual in their sexual responses, women were tactile or ‘haptic’. These responses were grounded in biology and so were impervious to change and social engineering. Given the lack of a strong visual element in women’s sexuality it was only natural, concluded Faust, that women did not consume pornography. Their biological make up precluded the existence of female voyeurism and explained why the magazine Viva (which featured naked male centrefolds) was so unsuccessful. As late as 1987 Faust was still confidently declaring that ‘women are not voyeurs’. Faust’s assertion rests on an implicit hetero-normatism blind to the rapaciousness with which women consume images of other women in magazines and on television. Nonetheless, the prescient point for the moment is the widespread acceptance that women were not voyeuristic in terms of men’s bodies.

Where Faust was explicit in her biological essentialism, anti-pornography feminists tended to be more implicit in their assumptions. Although they did not actively deny the existence of female desire, there was a strong sense that exploration of that desire was in questionable taste whilst any of the ‘sisters’ remained in sexual peril. ‘Erotica’ (sexually graphic images that did not demean or degrade women) was possible they conceded, but this halcyon sexual representation was to pornography what communism was to capitalism: a utopian state that would emerge after the revolution. Discussions of sex and desire were to be deferred until the feminist revolution made it ‘safe’ to explore such topics.

This disinclination to discuss in any depth the nature of female desire led anti-pornography feminists to implicitly construct male and female
desire as divergent rather than congruent. When they derided pornography for ‘telling lies about women’s sexuality’ but then shied away from delineating exactly what the ‘truth’ was behind this distortion, there was a temptation to assume that the ‘truth’ simply lay in opposition to the ‘false’. When an image is deconstructed and criticised for propagating ‘false’ ideas we tend to fall back into binary epistemologies - the ‘truth’ is the opposite of the ‘false’ rather than something undreamt of, existing tangentially or totally outside the ‘false’ and its opposites.

Alison Anderson honed in on this problem in an early review of Dworkin’s Pornography and Susan Griffin’s Pornography and Silence:31

The problem is that alongside Griffin’s attack on male supremacy as an anti-life force with all its cruelty, sadism, need to destroy and humiliate there emerges, as if by default, a reverse definition of - once again - the “real” nature of women: feeling love, innocence, nurturance, and adherence to truth and beauty against all odds. ... The whole notion is remarkably redolent of a lot of cant written about women by such notorious anti-feminists as Ruskin, with his ideal women and virgin madonnas without public hair, and of Freud’s “Biology as destiny” thesis. If only they were left to themselves, women could make the world a real spiritual bower.32

Anti-pornography feminism thus invited us to idealise female sexuality as softer, less genital and more romantic than men’s. Women apparently eschewed objectification in pursuit of fairly inchoate qualities like ‘reciprocity’, ‘mutuality’ and ‘equality’. Seen through these rose-coloured glasses, female desire was curiously muted and truncated. There was no space for the female spectator and consumer of sexual images. Male desire, in contrast, was demonised as rapacious, visual, hateful and misogynist, endlessly deployed in a war against women.

The explosion of images and ideas that invert these stereotypes in the 1990s has been spectacular. The shift towards the visibility of female voyeurism within Australian popular culture and the pornography market might be accounted for by several factors. One possibility is the presence in Australia of what Dennis Altman referred to as the ‘Sydney Libertarian tradition’.33 Sydney libertarianism (which Altman claimed had no American parallel) had its genesis in the Sydney Push and included Germaine Greer, Liz Fell, Lillian Roxon and Wendy Bacon within its sphere of influence. They were all strong, articulate and autonomous women who were able to carve niches for themselves, political, literary and sexual, in the boys’ club of 1960s and 1970s civil libertarianism. Mackenzie Wark situates Catharine Lumby within this Sydney libertarian strain. This tradition perhaps made Australian culture particularly amenable to images of female desire
although it does not satisfactorily explain the absence of these images in
the 1980s.

Another factor impinging on the explosion of images of female desire
might be the belated recognition by pornographers and advertisers that
the female market was being under exploited. Just as advertisers did not
begin to pitch their messages specifically at women until after the second
world war, so pornographers have been slow to cater for the female market.
Indeed their very tardiness might be a product of the vehemence with which
anti-pornography feminism denied and/or decried female voyeurism. The
increased visibility of lesbian sexuality and the deployment of the female
gaze in such lesbian practices as the Wicked Women competition might
have prompted image producers to tap into the idea of women as subjects
of sexual consumption. In addition, the ultimate failure of anti-
pornography feminist legislation to be adopted anywhere might have
wearied even the most vigilante image police and prompted a new
willingness to construct feminist-friendly images rather than censor-
misogynist ones.

For whatever the reasons, Australian pop culture images and the
pornography market have embraced female desire and men as objects of
that desire. In 1990, three volumes of pornography were launched into
the Australian marketplace aimed specifically at women. According to a
male journalist, Moments of Desire: Sex and Sensuality by Australian Feminist
Writers, Women’s Erotica: Erotica by Australian Women and Working Hot
provided ‘material just as explicit and perverse as that available to men’. This
assertion was derided by a female editor who complained that the
books were still too tame - ‘the editors seem to believe that women’s
sexuality is different to men’s - it is somehow nicer, less explicit’. This
complaint down played divergence in desire between men and women
and argued instead for an objectifying, insistent feminine lust that
paralleled male sexuality.

A swag of magazines and videos of varying degrees of explicitness began
pitching themselves at the female market. Australian Women’s Forum (which
features nude male centrefolds albeit with non-tumescent penises) claims
a circulation of 43 000 of which about 70% is (generally straight) female. On Our Backs directed itself to the lesbian population whilst Samois catered
for the s/m practitioners in Sydney’s lesbian community. Ecstasy: The
Australian Journal of the Erotic Arts emerged as the first uniquely Australian
pornographic magazine. Although Ecstasy’s editor (Robbie Swan) did
masquerade as a female editor under the pseudonym of Caroline C. Sweetly,
the magazine abided by a rule that half of its text and images had to be
produced by women. Ecstasy marketed itself as ‘stylish, sensitive, non-
sexist, multicultural’.

It was the pornographic video market, however, that reacted most
enthusiastically to the advent of mainstreamed female voyeurism. Candida
Royalle, an American feminist and former porn actor, launched Femme
Productions to produce videos for the female market. Her tapes became widely available in Australian sex shops and are regularly touted in the ‘couples’ section of catalogues. An Australian woman who established a mail order service to deliver such products to women was soon inundated with a customer base of 7000 women. A sociologist from the University of New England posed the statement that ‘women enjoy X-rated videos just as much as men do’ to an (admittedly limited) survey of female pornography consumers. He found 91% of his respondents strongly agreed with the statement. In fact Hugh Potter’s survey unearthed a new complaint about pornography from a feminist perspective that had nothing to do with sexual violence or trivialisation. Rather, one of his respondents protested that men directed too much of their sexual energy towards pornography leaving ‘real women’ unsatisfied! These changes in the Australian pornographic economy were mirrored in the United States and Europe, with up to 63% of X-rated video tapes now apparently rented by women or couples.

Barbara Creed suggested that this new visibility of female desire and voyeurism was evidence that the cultural gaze had fundamentally shifted. ‘In film and other areas of popular culture emphasis was originally on a study of the image of woman, on what images did to women. Now emphasis is more on what women - female spectators - do with images. Emphasis has moved from text to spectator.’ This movement of women from being ‘looked at’ to actively looking was exemplified by Catharine Lumby, author of Bad Girls, acting as a judge at the inaugural Adult Video Industry Australia (AVIA) erotic video awards. In fact to some extent Lumby personifies the new female voyeurism. Before moving into journalism, Lumby had worked as an art critic in the 1980s. Interpreting images was thus her stock in trade. In stark contrast, anti-pornography feminist Jocelyne Scutt did not own a television set. Image literacy was the hallmark of the critics who were most influential in re-defining women’s relationship to and with images in the 1990s in Australia.

The corollary of women’s movement into the pornographic economy as spectators is a new visibility of the male body. Of course, men have always performed in pornography, but they have remained curiously invisible in the pornographic discourse. Thus independent Australian senator and anti-pornography crusader Brian Harradine could claim of pornography that it ‘mediates in the minds of the habitual viewer a perception of women as being highly promiscuous and therefore available’ as if the men in pornography were demure and virginal. The male performer inhabited a blind spot in the censor’s view because of the implicit assumption that his presence was secondary to the female performer. It rests on an assumption that the consumer is a heterosexual male who insinuates himself into the narrative via the male performer and sees with his eyes. Thus, the focus of his gaze is the female performer.

In the 1990s, however, female eyes have opened to the eroticised male body. Lumby situated the sexualised male body at the centre of a ‘recent
spate of ads which locate women as voyeurs and men as objects of sexual desire.\textsuperscript{47} She describes an advertisement running in 1995 for a brand of orange juice in which ‘a line of men in tight orange shorts is checked out by two women in a gym. The girls lick their lips and make squeezing gestures. The advertisement then dissolves into a fantasy sequence in which a pair of male buttocks turn into oranges’.\textsuperscript{48} Diet Coke has also recently exploited the woman as sexual subject, man as object paradigm. In a current advertisement a group of women file expectantly into a colleague’s office to enjoy the spectacle of a delectable male worker who, stripped to the waist, delivers cartons of coke or cleans windows. The women pout and drool in his direction. One wipes a condensation drop from her coke can — a lingering, suggestive gesture of desire.

Ardent heterosexual female desire is also the dominant motif of the Radox Showerfresh ads. The camera focuses on a lean, toned woman showering with a moisturising body wash. The implication is that this is just another advertisement that sells products by commodifying the female body. The woman, now robed, sashays out onto her balcony to join her male partner. Her gaze alights on her attractive male neighbour and in time to the voice-over (‘after Showerfresh you’ll feel like a new man’), pushes her partner off the balcony and boldly strides over to the ‘new man’. The magazine version of this advertisement features a spectacularly gorgeous naked man in the shower with his buttocks firmly in the camera frame. To his right is a picture of a bottle of Radox Showerfresh. Dividing the two images is a strip of text that reads ‘The one on the right can also stimulate your mind’. Here, men are being objectified solely as instruments of female pleasure: a complete inversion of the subject/object relations we (as consumers) have come to expect.

Of course, the idea of rapacious female sexuality is not new. It has been a staple of the West’s sexual mythology for centuries expressed in phenomena as divergent as the witch hunts and the ‘she must have asked for it’ apologia for male sexual violence. What is new is the positivity with which this female sexual identity is being embraced. The mood in all of these ads is tongue-in-cheek and the women are portrayed as proud, strong and libidinous. These are women we should aspire to identify with rather than demonise and repudiate.

Royalle based one of her popular pornographic videos on the burgeoning image of men as sexual objects. In \textit{Nine Lives Hath my Love}, Jeanne Fine plays a talented artist who punishes her male lovers when their demands impinge on her professional and creative time.\textsuperscript{49} This punishment consists in casting an off-camera spell that transforms the men into cats. This witty narrative both locates a space for the female voyeur and succinctly places men on the receiving end of the gaze. Firstly, in suggesting that Fine is a witch, Royalle pokes fun at men for their historical fear of female sexuality. She also inverts classic subject/object relations by
turning the men into ‘pussies’. What is more, the narrative presents Fine as preparing for a major art exhibition in which she will display her paintings of her favourite artistic subject: cats. The ‘pussy’ being placed on display for the delectation of the female viewer is male. What is more, his mutation into mere object is inflicted on him as a punishment for attempting to entrench his needs at the expense of his lover’s.

Are these images of men as sexual objects for the female gaze merely extending to men the kind of trivialisation and truncation that women have been complaining of for years? Do they simply invite men to partake of the body image neurosis that women are afflicted by? Lumby argues that the notion that these images are ‘reverse sexism’ misses

the most important aspect of sexism - the role of male social and economic power. It’s not the sexual objectification of women which feminism finds objectionable, but the idea that women are represented solely as objects of male desire. They have been reduced to their usefulness to men. Women can objectify men without oppressing them because men are already seen as multidimensional.\(^\text{50}\)

The act of objectifying or being objectified is not the nexus of sexism. Rather, objectification assumes sexist and stereotyping dimensions if an individual is not free to move fluidly between the position of object to subject, from looker to looked-at and from powerful to submissive. Unfortunately since the industrial revolution women have enjoyed very few cultural representations with which to identify. Those that do exist have usually hinged to some degree or other on the image of the Madonna or the Whore. Our choices have effectively been the sexless ‘good girl’ or the sex-consumed ‘bad girl’.

In contrast, men have enjoyed many images of what it is to be men: man as warrior, man as statesman, man as benign but firm patriarch, man as adventurer, man as intellectual. Conspicuously absent from this line up of cultural images is one of man as sex symbol. Admittedly, the image of the sportsman does focus rather more on the corporeal than the cerebral but even this is usually presented as homo-social. The invisibility of eroticised man for the female gaze probably explains why when moral crusaders, politicians and feminists alike talk about pornography, they talk as if it is a medium inhabited solely by women.

Scott McDonald has argued that one of the unfortunate implications of the ‘woman as body/woman as object of beauty’ paradigm has been the corresponding implication that men are ugly and undesirable.\(^\text{51}\) The new, tentative exploration of the idea of man as object of the desiring female gaze is neither belittling nor stereotyping precisely because it is the latest
expression in a large (if not terribly diverse) pool of cultural images and ideas of what men ‘are’, a diversity women are only just beginning to enjoy.

Madonna’s 1992 book *Sex* is a good illustration of what I am trying to articulate here. The book featured 112 pages of photographs by Steve Meisel featuring Madonna in sexual clinches with other celebrities such as Isabella Rossellini and Naomi Campbell. In explicitness, there was little to choose between *Sex* and *Penthouse, Playboy* or *Hustler*. Yet a review of the book in *The Australian* wrote of the photographs that ‘they are ... what used to be called pornography, is sometimes called erotica, and here is intended to be consumed as art’. 52 This movement from low-brow pornography to respectable erotica and even ‘art’ is effected because of who Madonna is. Her complex, multi-faceted persona of songwriter of astounding longevity, actor, mother, sex symbol, producer and free speech exponent mitigates against a perception of her as somehow solely sexual. Although she might be producing images of herself as an object to be visually enjoyed, we are never deluded that anyone other than Madonna, acting of her own free will, is behind the production of those images. She is sexual subject even as she is sexual object.

Similarly, Catharine Lumby explicitly tries to generate multiple images of herself that include (but are not limited to) that of sexual object. Wark captured the multiplicity of her image/s when he described her thus:

A woman appears on *Late Night Live* with Phillip Adams, voicing her ideas, but she also decorates Mikey Robbins’ panel on the ABC TV comedy game show *Good News Week*. The Australian critiques her at great length, then she pops up in black bra and panties in the music magazine *Juice*. Exquisitely photographed in *Vogue*, she wisecracks her way through the comedy panel show *Mouthing Off*. She garners an endorsement from distinguished feminist philosopher Moira Gatens, and features as a talking head on the commercial TV show *Sex Life*.53

Lumby *voices and decorates*. She is both instrumental and ornamental in the propagation of her image.

This point about the fusion of sexual subjectivity and objectivity is crucial because in modern Western understandings of sex outside heterosexual marriage, sex is frequently perceived as something that ‘depletes’ women. For example, the sex worker is not considered to sell her labour. Rather, in common parlance she ‘sells herself’. This telling phrase implies that the sex worker has parted with something intrinsic to herself, that she has relinquished her subjectivity and her control over her own body. That sex workers are assumed to have given away their subjectivity probably
explains why feminists, politicians and religious leaders have so confidently spoken for and about sex workers in the past - after all, a person with no self cannot speak for them-selves. It also perhaps explains why some people (judges among them) appear puzzled when prostitutes claim to have been raped: Having sold this 'self' it cannot be taken back again at will.

The sexual double standard aptly demonstrates how closely linked 'sex' and 'self' are in the idea of womanhood. In the popular consciousness a man who is promiscuous is a 'stud', his 'self' is enhanced by his sexual adventures. In contrast, a woman is demeaned. The more desire she evinces the more her 'self' is given away until she is an object of scorn and ridicule expressed in derogatory terms like 'slut', 'slag' and 'whore'. The new location of women as actively desiring voyeurs and multi-dimensional sexual subjects/objects challenges the traditionally negative nexus operating between women and sex. It imbues active sexual desire with a new positivity for women and provides men with an opportunity to explore objectification and eroticisation of their bodies.

Doubtless this inversion of traditional subject/object relations will not be relished by all men. But perhaps that may not be such a bad thing. Perhaps the sense of being sexually scrutinised and visually devoured will prompt a new sensitivity to the way the male gaze is deployed. A scene from the hugely successful British film The Full Monty expressed this well. Whilst preparing for their debut as strippers, five working-class men flick through a glossy magazine. They all scrutinise a photo of a female model, prompting one of them to the criticism that 'her tits are too big'. It then dawns on the would-be-strippers that the women who comprise their audience will be deploying their gaze in a similar way: the twist being that it is they who will be on the receiving end of the desiring gaze. The moment in which this realisation dawns (in tandem with the thought that most of them do not possess the faces and physiques to withstand this kind of scrutiny) is an exquisite celluloid moment. After a short silence one of the men remarks that the model in the photo probably has a 'really nice personality'!

I do not wish to imply by this short trawl through images in popular culture and pornography that feminism has won a complete victory over the way that women (and men) are portrayed. On the contrary, we continue to be confronted by the same mind-numbingly boring, tedious and tiresome images of femininity at every newsstand and in every pornography catalogue. Nonetheless, change is occurring. The image of the actively desiring woman who deploys her gaze in a quest for pleasure was largely absent in the pornography and popular culture of the 1970s and 1980s. The representational emergence of the eroticised male body unveiled for heterosexual women offers to both women and men new scope for exploring sexual desire and pleasure. It also suggests a new freedom to negotiate between various images and identities without being pigeonholed in any one.
Notes

1Pure, Wicked Pictures, USA, 1996.
2The term ‘pornographic economy’ was initially used to describe the trade in pornographic products between producers and consumers of pornography (see Linda Williams, Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989). It thus referred to the pornography industry itself and the performers, script writers, distributors and others involved in pornography production. I have extended the term to refer also to the production, circulation and consumption of ideas about pornography.
13Ibid.
16Williams.
17True Blue, Down Under Video/Australia, Parliament Video USA, and Mature Media Group Australia, 1989.
18Jones.
19Dworkin, Pornography, p.46.
20Of course, men have existed for the voyeurism of gay men in the pornographic economy since pornography was first produced. See H. Montgomery Hyde, A History of Pornography, Heinemann Press, Bristol, 1964.
21By ‘pornographic discourse’ I mean the ideas about pornography which are in circulation at any given time.


Andrea Dworkin, Intercourse (1987), Arrow Books, London, 1988. However, Dworkin denies that she has ever written that heterosexual sex and rape are synonymous and has challenged magazines like Time which claim that she has to find and print her words. They have never successfully been able to do so. See Michael Moorcock, ‘Fighting Talk’, New Statesman & Society, 21 April 1995, reproduced at <http://www.igc.apc.org/Womensnet/dworkin/MoorcockInterview.html>, 9 January 1999.


Ibid., p.60.


On the Wicked Women competition see Catherine Lumby, ‘Sexitist or Sexy?’, Independent Monthly, November 1993, p.34.

Reviewers of these volumes tended to refer to them as ‘erotic’ rather than ‘pornographic’. I prefer to simply use ‘pornography’ to refer to sexually explicit images designed to arouse sexual feelings.


Ibid., p.2.

Lumby, ‘Sexitist or Sexy?’, p.34.

Aubin, p.25.


Ibid., p.83.

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